

Starved Rock State Park

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State Parks stand for many things in United States history. People who believed that the history and beauty of nature should be preserved, promoted parks. State parks were not merely used for a way to escape the bustle of the city; they provided genuine insight into nature and the history of the state. Illinois has many great state parks that deliver both history and nature to all that visit them. One of the best state parks in Illinois that supplies both history and beautiful nature is Starved Rock State Park.

“I have stood upon Starved Rock and gazed for hours upon the beautiful Landscape spread out before me. The undulating plains, rich in their verdure; the rounded hills beyond, clad in their forest livery; the gentle stream, pursuing its noiseless way to the Mississippi and the Gulf, all in harmonious association, make up a picture over which the eye delights to linger, and when to these are added recollections of the heroic adventurers who first occupied it; that here the banner of France so many years floated freely in the winds; that here was civilization while all around was barbaric darkness, - the most intense and varied emotions cannot fail to be awakened”, this is how Sydney Breese described his encounter with Starved Rock. The park is filled with spectacular overlooks along the Illinois River, crystalline waterfalls in eighteen different canyons, and vertical walls of moss-covered stone. The fascinating rock formations were shaped by glacial melt water hundreds of millions of years ago. However, it is not just beauty that makes the park, it is the history that took place in the park that makes it one of the most important state parks in Illinois. As many guidebooks on Starved Rock say,

“There’s history to explore, as well as amazing sights to see, and endless activities to enjoy.”

The Illinois State Parks Commission established Starved Rock State Park in 1911 but the majority of the history occurs centuries before the park was officially fixed. From the sixteenth century through the seventeenth century, a sub-group of five thousand to seven thousand Illiniwek, the Kaskaskia, had a village across the Illinois River from what is now the current site of the state park. In 1673 the first Europeans came to the area. They were Louis Jolliet, Father Jacques Marquette and five companions who were exploring the Illinois River. After their discovery, Robert LaSalle, who Eaton G. Osman, author of *Starved Rock*, describes as “the greatest name in the history of French exploration in North America after Champlain”, came to the land in the 1680s. In 1682 he built Fort St. Louis on top of the 125-foot bluff because of its commanding strategic position above the last rapids of the Illinois River. In the early 1700s the French abandoned the fort because of war pressure with the Iroquois. Osman describes the scene upon LaSalle’s return to the wrecked fort, “Everything was in waste . . . LaSalle knew it was the work of the Iroquois.” The ruined fort then became a safe haven for fur trappers. However, by 1720, the fort was completely destroyed by a fire. This explains some of the early European history of the area, but how did the rock get its name? Legend has it that an Illiniwek killed Pontiac, chief of the Ottawa tribe. During one of the battles that happened to avenge his killing, a band of Illiniwek, under attack by a force of Potawatomi, allies of the Ottawa, sought refuge atop the 125-foot sandstone bluff. The Ottawa and Potawatomi surrounded the bluff and held their ground until the

Illiniwek died of starvation, since they had no way of getting provisions, thus giving it the name “Starved Rock.”

Many, hearing of this legend, came to Starved Rock. Osman describes the many people as, “The modern Starved Rock beleaguers come arrayed in outing suits and picnic habiliments; and where once the Frenchmen braved the terrors of savagery, his nineteenth century successors, born of all nations, now invade the land to make a fresco holiday.” In the 1800s private promoters attempted to make this area the “Gibraltar of the West”, which failed. It was then later developed into a recreational center with a dance pavilion, hotel and swimming pool. In 1911 the Illinois State Parks Commission bought the area known as Starved Rock and turned it into a state park, becoming the second state park in Illinois. Osman says they did this so that “the great historic site will be preserved from the destructive attrition of pure commercialism that was ruining its physical beauty, and the Rock will forever stand as a monument to the indomitable LaSalle . . . which has preserved to the people of the Illinois Valley.” The Illinois State Parks Commission was originally stationed at Starved Rock. The Commission decided that too much of the park was being eroded. They built planks and stairways around Starved Rock State Park to prevent the effects of erosion from human beings. After the commission decided that they wanted to protect the area they found the deed to the land and purchased the 2,630 acres adjacent to 582 acres of nature preserve. They bought the park to preserve the land and history for future generations.

Starved Rock State Park today is visited by many in Illinois and many other states. It provides information into Illinois’s past, shares the beauty of the natural world, and provides a way to get away from the business and relax. The history of the park was

filled with bloodshed, failure, and French influence. The history of Illinois just would not have been the same if not for the Starved Rock area. [From Sydney Breese, *An Early History of Illinois*; Kristen Filipek, Kristin Friant, and Matt Richards, Starved Rock State Park and Surrounding Areas, “Starved Rock,” <www.jove.goel.niu.edu>. (Oct. 15, 2006); Ellen Flahive, “Starved Rock,” *Illinois State Parks Magazine*; Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, Bureau of Tourism and FCB/Impact. Illinois Weekend Getaway Guide, Getaway 18; Illinois Department of Natural Resources, “Starved Rock,” <www.dnr.state.il.us>. (Oct. 15, 2006); Ed Lina, S. Plucker-Kay, L. Roehrick, *Brevet’s Historical Markers and Sites*; Barb McCaig, Margie McCaig, and Lynn Soli. “Gibraltar of the West,” Illinois Parks and Forests; Eaton G. Osman, *Starved Rock*; Village of North Utica, “Tourist Attractions,” “Starved Rock,” <www.utica-il.com/-22k>. (Oct. 15, 2006); and Ray D. Wilson, Illinois Historical Tour Guide.]